New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
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NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Listed alphabetically are the names of actors and actresses in shows opening during the year 1955. The number opposite the name indicates the pages on which each is found in NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS. We regret that we cannot include the various cast changes, but can only give the opening night casts as published in the New York newspapers.

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"Red Roses for Me"

The New York Times

December 29, 1955

Theatre: Sean O'Casey

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AFTER an absence of twenty-one years, Sean O'Casey has returned with a beautiful play, "Red Roses for Me," which was acted at the Booth last evening.

Since it was written twelve years ago, one can only wonder why it took so long to reach New York. Perhaps someone had to learn how to stage it. If so, John O'Shaughnessy is obviously the man. For he has staged it with humor and something approaching wonder in the last half of the evening. The melody of words is there; the pugnacious Irish comedy; the dreams of glory for Dublin, and finally the solemn church rites of the last act when a man of the people goes to his Maker, mourned by those who love him.

According to the program, the play is based on a strike in Dublin in 1913-14 that led to the "bloody Easter Week Rising of 1916." But as in all Mr. O'Casey's latter-day plays, the real theme is the life of man—his valor, his joy, his love, his religious devotion, his loyalty and his belief in the future. Mr. O'Casey has long since abandoned naturalistic drama for the poetry of mankind.

Some of "Red Roses for Me" will remind you of the raffish comedy of "Juno and the Paycock." The gorgeous wrangles about religion and patriotism in a tenement room, the drunken dance of words when men are quarreling over things beyond their understanding, the grotesque diversions into the absurd—are there in the first half of the evening as they were all through "Juno."

There is some autobiography there, too. For the worker who spends his money on books and art and tries to learn the truth of the whole universe in one fell swoop is the O'Casey of half a century ago. And the patient mother who gets on with everyone and is never too worn to sit up with a sick neighbor is Mrs. O'Casey, who had that mission in Sean's early life.

But most of all "Red Roses for Me" is a drama of verbal splendor. It wears a golden robe of words. In the course of the evening, the mood, even the nature of the play, changes—from homely comedy to an austere masque and then into religious devotion. But the flow of imagery and allusion runs on in a rich stream of words that glow with beauty and reveal the kindly wisdom of a man who has been in combat all his days but has never lost the purity of his faith in life. Rapturous writing comes naturally from his pen. He does not have to put phrases down on paper self-consciously.

All honor to the cast, as well as the director. For this is the sort of play that could easily have become a pose. But despite the luster of the style, the acting has its feet on the ground. Kevin McCarthy as the very young lad who is trying to carry the world on his shoulders; Eileen Crowe, welcome to New York once more, giving a brave and tender performance as the mother; Joyce Sullivan as the maiden who loves a firebrand—play the central parts with softness, truth and simplicity.

But the minor characters emerge in gusty performances that give the play its human scope. E. G. Marshall is very funny indeed as the belligerent Protestant. Eamon Flynn as the Roman Catholic and Casey Walters as the supercilious atheist are also amusing, and keep the battle of the dogmas salty and humorous.

In his designs for the scenery, Howard Bay may have insisted on too much literal detail, particularly for the first two acts. But the lighting is wonderfully evocative for the hymn to Dublin in the third act. There is a dance of joy in that scene, well designed by Anna Sokolow; and there is a lovely musical score by Edwin Finckel.

After the long absence it is wonderful to have another play by Mr. O'Casey that is original in style, pungent in humor, beautiful in its language and resolute in spirit. He always was a man.

"RED ROSES FOR ME"

Play by Sean O'Casey; staged by John O'Shaughnessy; settings and lighting by Howard Bay; music by Edwin Finckel; costumes by Ballou; choreography by Anna Sokolow; presented by Gordon W. Pollock at the Booth Theatre, December 28, 1955. The cast:

Mrs. Breydon.....Eileen Crowe
Ayamonn Breydon..Kevin McCarthy
Eeada.....Ann Dere
Dympa.....Katherine Hynes
Finoola.....Virginia Bosler
1st Neighbor.....Farrell Pelly
2nd Neighbor.....Page Johnson
3rd Neighbor...Vincent Dowling
Sheila Moorneen..Joyce Sullivan
Brennon o' the Moor.....
E. G. Marshall
Sammy.....David McDaniel
Roory O'Balacaun..Eamon Flynn
Mulcanny.....Casey Walters
Rev. E. Clinton.....
Michael Clarke Laurence
1st Railwayman...James C. Kelly
2nd Railwayman....Lou Frizzell
Inspector Finglas..Shamus Locke
3rd Railwayman..David McDaniel
Lounger.....Paul Sanasardo
Another Lounger....Jeff Duncan
Old Woman....Beatrice Seckler
Idle Woman.....Judith Coy
Lonely Man.....David Gold
Girl.....Sandra Pine
Another Girl.....Eve Beck
Drifter.....Jack Moore
Samuel.....Whitford Kane
Foster.....Barry Maccollum
Dowzard.....Jock McGraw
Lamplighter.....David Ryan

New York Post

December 29, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Sean O'Casey's 'Red Roses for Me'

"Red Roses for Me" is a diffuse and faulty play drenched in greatness. It is a highly parochial play given the universal accent of lyric beauty. It is the first new work by Sean O'Casey—if you can call a work "new" that had its world premiere in Dublin in 1943—to be presented here in over 20 years, and it was offered last night at the Booth Theater in an affectionate but occasionally faltering production that captured a large amount of the quality of a drama in which the flashes of genius more than atone for its sheer waywardness as playmaking.

It is certainly not a theater work that deigns to meets its American audience half way. Not only is it concerned with the Irish transport workers' strike in 1913, but its comic characters, and it has several very fine ones, are symbolic of Irish religious conflicts; it goes in for episodes of highly personal autobiography; it shifts its interest to bring in and pay tribute to the gallant figure of a Protestant clergyman who was kind to O'Casey and stuck up heroically for the strikers, and it shifts its mood from realism to fantasy and back again without hesitating.

Mood Change

Possibly it is this change in mood in the play's second half that is most characteristic of its author's spirit. O'Casey always did have a habit, often confusing to people less mercurial than the Irish, of changing back and forth in a flash between hilarity and tragedy, but this time, as in "The Silver Tassie," it is between his early Dublin realism and his later lyric fantasy. Here the author has a vision of Dublin momentarily transfigured by a dream of beauty and fraternity, and he represents it in terms of dance and poetry. And it is also characteristic of him that he makes the scene very lovely and moving.

It is in such flashes of poetic imagination as this transfiguration of Dublin, or such moments of tragic insight as his appreciation of the oppressed in their strength and weakness, or such scenes of sardonic comedy as the brawls between the representatives of various Irish viewpoints that "Red Roses for Me" reveals its quality. There is no doubt that you must sit through difficult scenes to come to its peaks, but, when they arrive, the play laughs and sings heroically.

Essentially "Red Roses for Me" is Sean O'Casey's brooding reflections over a great and important period in his own life, which happened to coincide with a tragic period in modern Irish history, rather than any effort at conventional playmaking. The dramatist has poured into it his memories and his intense and idealistic feelings, and, because he writes with such moving beauty, his play sings and soars. It is not a good play in any technical sense, and it can fall into dangerous tedium, but in its best moments it is not far from a great one.

It is not an easy play to act, either, but Kevin McCarthy is admirable as the idealistic young striker, and there are helpful performances by Eileen Crowe as his mother, E. G. Marshall as a bearded and combative Protestant, Joyce Sullivan as the boy's neglected sweetheart, and Michael Clark Laurence as the clergyman. And Whitford Kane brings his own sunny, gentle charm to the brief role of a church sexton. "Red Roses for Me" is not a drama for casual playgoing, and it doesn't represent O'Casey at his most satisfying, but it possesses grandeur.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

December 29, 1955

'Red Roses for Me' Pure O'Casey, Lilting, Beautiful and a Bit Dull

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Not even Sean O'Casey, the crankiest and most egocentric literary genius since the time of another renegade Irishman, Shaw, could find much to complain about in the production of his play, "Red Roses for Me," as it was offered last evening at the Booth Theatre. It is beautifully spoken and beautifully pictured, and the flow of its poetry has a pleasantly benumbing effect; but as a piece for the theatre it lacks theatricality. It is not a whole tragedy, but only a fragment of a tragedy, and the passion which prompted O'Casey to write this drama many years ago now seems spent.

This fragment of a story concerns an assortment of Dubliners—Protestants, of course, and rebels, for in one way or another they all are O'Casey himself—who are involved in a transit workers' strike in 1913. They are more largely involved—as is O'Casey—in themselves, and they do a great deal of talking about themselves.

A Lilt, a Lift

Much of this talk has a lilt, a lift and a loveliness such as one rarely hears in the theatre, and in it, to give it flavor, is the inborn O'Casey bitterness. But, as a playgoer, I must report that much of it, brave and fine as it is, seems beside the point. The drama is a long time building to its climax—and the climax is an offstage affair in which the principal character is shot down by the police.

This principal character—O'Casey himself—is a young dreamer who would rather exult in the beauties of Shakespeare than work. He is most impressively played by Kevin McCarthy, and no less impressive is Eileen Crowe in the role of his mother (Mrs. O'Casey herself). There is a fine, showy piece of character acting by E. G. Marshall as a wealthy vagabond, and a sweetly appealing one by Joyce Sullivan as the dreamer's girl.

Stunning Set

Howard Bay's settings—a modest house, a Dublin street and a churchyard—are fine, imaginative works of art, and not a little of their stunning effect is due to the lighting of them. The costumes, by Ballou, are so good that they don't seem to be costumes—and there can be no higher praise than this.

John O'Shaughnessy has directed "Red Roses for Me" with a sharp eye for solid Irish comedy and a delicate ear for the author's singing prose, and Anna Sokolow has provide dan eerie dream ballet, set on the banks of the River Liffey, which is impressive. There also is music by Edwin Finckel which fits in unobtrusively and tastefully.

"Red Roses" is a literary experience and it has been given every good chance in Gordon W. Pollock's production, but it belongs more on a page than a stage.

Journal American
NEW YORK'S NEWSPAPER

December 29, 1955

O'Casey Play Follows A Tortuous Course

Good Cast and Fine Sets Can't Offset Confusion of the Plot

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT'S BEEN MANY A YEAR since Sean O'Casey, the great Irish playwright, has been represented on Broadway, but last night Gordon W. Pollock brought his "Red Roses for Me" into the Booth Theatre with an enormous and capable cast, three towering sets, and all the brilliant trappings and effects of a triple-A production. The trouble is, he forgot the play.

That is not to suggest tnat Mr. Pollock overlooked it; he has quite obviously reproduced Mr. O'Casey's mellifluous and often poetic thoughts with taste and accuracy. It's just that the author's divergent views on religion, love, loyalty and the state of Irish politics do not in this case congeal into a rewarding evening in the theatre.

One comes away with a confused impression of having seen four scenes from as many often charming but usually unrelated Irish dramas.

The background here is the Dublin Transport Workers' strike of 1913-14, a bit of violence involving the refusal of a general wage hike of one shilling a week. It gets off to a pleasant beginning in the home of a Protestant family; there is a love story running through, some amiable comedy concerned with the good-natured religious bickerings in the neighborhood.

Once the strike has been joined, however, at the start of the second act, the proceedings take on an eerie and almost mystical quality. Poverty-stricken figures crouch in the shadows of a poor street near the River Liffey; several thousand words are declaimed on the subject of the destitute in general, those in Dublin in particular, as the mist rises from the river and the lights grow dimmer. But then the hero appears, and light breaks through the clouds. There is hope after all—and mad dancing in the streets.

Bravura Finish

From this point onward it seemed to me that Mr. O'Casey, however brilliant and lyric his language, had become hopelessly mired in a consideration of the specialized problems of church and state undoubtedly urgent at the time but less appreciated by most of us today. The love story consequently trailed off into oblivion. There is a bravura finish in the fine tradition, but the effect is singularly hollow.

Acting honors are shared by Kevin McCarthy, Eileen Crowe, Joyce Sullivan, E. G. Marshall, Michael Clarke Laurence, Casey Walters and most of the others in the cast of thirty. There are snatches of original Irish ballads and jigs, and the brilliant sets by Howard Bay.

In that connection it must be noted that the neatest trick of the season was performed by the cast in executing a fast ballet in a stage canted at an angle designed only for mountain goats.

O'Casey fanciers will be pleased to re-hear his renowned language at the Booth, but it is doubtful if there are enough of the faithful to keep life in this turbulent and tortuous drama.

Daily Mirror

December 29, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Red Roses for Me' Opens at the Booth

• Sean O'Casey's controversial drama of Dublin strike found objectionable.

That Sean O'Casey's "Red Roses for Me" will have better than a limited appeal is doubtful. For the new arrival at the Booth Theatre is controversial and may prove highly objectionable to the truly devout. And it's not exactly going to cause entertainment seekers to rush into West 45th Street.

"Red Roses for Me" was fashioned with the Dublin transport workers' strike of 1913 as a background. Its principal character is an earnest young man who foregoes marriage for his beliefs, because the girl he loves wants him to play it safe, and cash in on the misery of his fellow railway employes.

INSTEAD, HE leads them in a fight with the police, and loses his life. He too seldom has had the opportunity to pursue his studies in art, music and science. And he is surrounded by argumentive friends, who represent varying philosophic and religious viewpoints.

In "Red Roses for Me," O'Casey has created some of his most vivid characters. They are wise and foolish, pathetic and amusing. And he has used words like a genuine poet. In fact, he has used too many of them. They fairly tumble out over the footlights at you. Some of them touching and moving, others bitter and undisciplined.

The first half of the play hews to the story line. It leaves you waiting for an eruptive climax. When you expect it at the beginning of the second and final stanza, there is a verbose, balletic sequence portraying the heartbreaks and sufferings of the impoverished and sick.

KEVIN McCARTHY is excellent as the idealist drawn inevitably to violence, when he is essentially a peace-loving man. **E. G. Marshall** contributes a wonderfully-etched portrait of a cantankerous and windy old gaffer.

Eileen Crowe, Joyce Sullivan, David McDaniel, Eamon Flynn, Casey Walters, Michael Clarke Laurence, Whitford Kane, Barry McCollum, Ann Dere and Virginia Bosler are standouts in other roles.

Howard Bay has designed one of the costliest and most striking productions of recent seasons. It's all done in simulated hand-carved stone. And John O'Shaughnessy has directed capably. If the script lacks dramatic tightness and tenseness, most of the blame should be placed on the author's shoulders.

GORDON W. POLLOCK makes an auspicious bow as a manager. It took a lot of courage on his part to tackle the provocative work. It is quite easy to understand why Broadway's veteran impresarios have steered clear of this leftist soap-boxer for so long. There are a lot of playgoers who are going to resent it. And "Red Roses for Me" is not for us, either.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 29, 1955

'Red Roses' a Rare And Major Event

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The new production of a Sean O'Casey play in New York is a rare major event. Now his "Red Roses for Me" has a lavish and respectful production at the Booth. The physical richness of scenery, costumes and lighting, of music and dancing, and the enormous cast, is a sort we never see any more in the legitimate theater.

O'Casey is a brilliant, often exasperating, genius of the theater. This mounting of his play does much for him, except for an ultimate and desperate failure to ignite in the fervor of his urgent poetry.

It is heartbreaking that the poetic spirit should seem old-fashioned in our theater. We are out of the habit, and the actors do not have the fine, uninhibited swing to make it soar.

"Red Roses" is a symbol of the positive daring that makes life worth having and risking, to a young poet and painter. Like any good stage Irishman, the fact that he makes so little money seems to him a poor reason for the girl he loves to turn him down.

She is Catholic and he Protestant. They live in the midst of verbose religious antagonism. Then along comes a strike. She knows he can be a blackleg, a scab, and end up a foreman. He chooses to unfurl his gallant banners and fight, and is killed.

This is related in a wild variety of moods. There is literal farce, poetic drama, melodrama and fantastic ballet.

Singing Language.

What holds it together is the thick richness of O'Casey's language, gaudy with color, spectacular of image, all its ideas singing. It is the nature of the play's texture, an incredibly imaginative brocade, that makes its versatile humors acceptable as an entity.

This poetry views the dirt and the stars, the horror of life and its splendor, with equal avidity. It is lusty as you like but it is never literal.

The performance is in awe of the play, at least in several key roles. It needs to rave with bitter poetic mercy, and the readings sound starry-eyed.

Kevin McCarthy is the poet, in a romantic vein, more the artist than the knight, warm rather than violent and so not as vivid as O'Casey's words would fairly permit. Eileen Crowe is cool as his generous mother, and Joyce Sullivan plays bravely as the girl for whom there will never be red roses.

Beautifully Acted.

E. G. Marshall has a fine sparkle for the old neighborhood bore, whose songs thread through the play. Eamon Flynn is crackling as his testy Catholic enemy, and Michael Clarke Laurence is suave and strong as the pastor.

Two comparatively small roles are beautifully acted, one by Casey Walters as the cynical friend, and the other by Shamus Locke playing the inspector. Whitford Kane makes a gem of an even briefer role.

Howard Bay has designed a striking arch, with deeply raked stage, which converts valorously from flat to riverside, for the symphony of Dublin, and finally to a churchyard.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

December 29, 1955

THEATER

'Red Roses for Me'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE fog licks steadily at the beautiful settings Howard Bay has designed for Sean O'Casey's "Red Roses for Me." It curls endlessly against the windows of the fortress-like Dublin home of the Breydons, with a noble reindeer's head set on the mantelpiece and the stage tilting toward us so that it almost spills into our laps. And it rolls in ominously from the river Liffey as the dispossessed men and the keening women of Ireland sit by an embankment to dream of a more golden day. Mr. Bay's hand has never been more imaginative, nor his lighting more subtle.

But the fog gets into the bones of the play, too. Indeed the rhetorical exercise at the Booth seems to have no bones. In taking the Dublin Transport Workers' Strike of 1913 as the mere starting point for his caustic, rarely compelling reverie, Mr. O'Casey has moved one more stubborn inch toward the lyric play of his dreams.

His dreams are bold ones: he would like to hurl onto the stage, with orchestral abandon and orchestral fury, quick snatches of earthy realism, expansive moments of boozy comedy, outright flights into choral poetry, stinging shafts of bitter symbolism, and—insistent behind the prodigal melange—a rhythmic undercurrent of marching feet, hurled stones, chugging trains, and sudden, meaningful music.

The ambitious form, noble in its aspirations and everlastingly cumbersome in its untidiness, remains a dream. We have no sooner begun to take a personal interest in the bookish young man with a social conscience than a rich, careless, uncontrollable tongue whisks them away from us. The figures on stage begin to speak less personally, a voice from the wings begins to supply them with run-on metaphor, whatever was direct becomes distant and booming and—at the last hollow. The drama has been sacrificed to Mr. O'Casey's own delirious diction.

And for all the tart humor, tangy phrasing, and sharp-witted irony that pours out of the author like an exuberantly whistling steam-kettle, the language is still not powerful enough, not affecting enough in an emotional way, to sweep us over the difficulties and along into the realm of pure, soaring sound. The words ("Time's grey finger puts a warning speck on the rose of youth," "You were ever listening for the beat of the wings of the angel of fear") are never quite worth the sacrifice.

It must be said that the players at the Booth, working under John O'Shaugnessey's evenly-measured direction, are not giving Mr. O'Casey his sometimes crackling due. Here and there an authentically vigorous voice is heard: in Eileen Crowe's motherly concern, in Michael Lawrence's precise clergyman, occasionally in E. G. Marshall's gleeful twitting of his religious-minded and evolutionary-minded friends.

Here and there, too, an entire stage-moment has the O'Casey color in close to full bloom: a man in a raincoat reading Ruskin by the light of a lantern, a song sung by a glossily dressed minstrel, a fragment of rising music as a freshly painted Virgin is unveiled, three old coots continuing a quarrel on their knees as they duck broken glass during a riot.

But at the heart of the piece there are some unholy reciters. Kevin McCarthy, as the lad who gives up mother and girl to see that the trainmen get one more shilling, begins by doling out a measure of Shakespeare. He never quite gets rid of the intonation, lifting his voice to a dead-level pitch and letting the words fall like a blanket over his fellow-players. Joyce Sullivan, as the girl who would tempt him to "blast with the black frost of desertion the faith of his comrades," can only pump sound into a crisis: there is no lash to the syllables that lurch out of her. And, despite Ann Dere's cheerful thought that no matter how bad things get "there's always Guinness," the antiphonal voices that are raised in joy and disillusion during the formal and masque-like third act are strained and pretentious as they further cloud the air.

Sean O'Casey's secure reputation continues to rest on "The Plough and the Stars," "Juno and the Paycock," and several trenchant, completely evocative volumes of autobiography.

"The Righteous Are Bold"

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

December 23, 1955

'Righteous Are Bold' Is a Serious And Picturesque Irish Folk Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There may be, quite easily, a great amount of deep philosophy in Frank Carney's drama, "The Righteous Are Bold," which Eddie Dowling produced last evening at the Holiday Theatre. But as a member of the audience I must have got a little behind in my work somewhere, because the only clear message I got out of the play is that it is a bad thing for a big healthy girl from County Mayo to spend two years in England. It upsets her mind.

This girl, stridently played by Irene Hayes, comes home to Croagh Patrick, where the mist blows thick and the wind blows strong and the birds all cry like abandoned souls, and she is most obviously not well adjusted. She has strange bruises on her body, is subject to frequent frenzies and is particularly antipathetic to anything having to do with religion—so much so that in one particular angry outburst she destroys a statuette of a holy figure.

Who Will Cure Her?

This girl, therefore, is obviously a subject for some kind of therapy—but what kind? Her parents, poor farmers, have a try at getting her back into the family fold but it's no go. The doctor is called, and so is the priest. The doctor says rest and a good diet will fix her up, but the priest is inclined to believe that she is possessed, and until the devil within her is exorcised she will not recover. Family and doctor are wrong and the priest is right—and in finally liberating the girl from the unhappiness which possesses her the priest himself dies.

"The Righteous Are Bold" is, of course, an Irish play which once was produced at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. A mostly Irisn cast is acting it under Dowling's direction, and it is a very picturesque cast. Most picturesque of the players is P. J. Kelly, who has a character bit as a postman who is willing to mix a little witchcraft with his orthodox beliefs.

O'Dea Is Majestic

Nora O'Mahony and Len Doyle play the girl's sorely beset parents, and Liam Gannon appears as an old boy friend who tries to bring the lass back to normalcy by acting like an old boy friend.

"THE RIGHTEOUS ARE BOLD"

Play by Frank Carney; staged by Eddie Dowling; setting by Watson Barratt; lighting by Peggy Clark; costumes by Audre; presented by Mr. Dowling at the Holiday Theatre December 22, 1955. The cast:

Mary Kate Geraty.....
Nora O'Mahoney
Michael Martin Geraty..Len Doyle
Willie the Post.....P. J. Kelly
Anthony Costello...Liam Gannon
Patrick Geraty.....James Neylin
Nora Geraty.....Irene Hayes
Dr. Moran.....Bryan Herbert
Father O'Malley....Denis O'Dea
Mother Benedict..Frederica Going
Sister Mary of the Rosary....
Mary O'Brady

The role of the priest who gives his life to save a troubled soul is rather majestically portrayed by Denis O'Dea. There is a pleasant setting of a thatched farmhouse by Watson Barratt, with plenty of mist blowing by in the sky and a good hot blaze in the fireplace. But I don't think the drama has much to offer a casual and lightminded theatregoer like myself.

Daily Mirror
December 23, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Righteous Are Bold' Is Not for Broadway

• Play had run of 16 weeks at Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

"The Righteous Are Bold," which Eddie Dowling brought to the Holiday Theatre Thursday evening, had a record run of 16 weeks at Dublin's famous Abbey Theatre back in 1946. It is easy to understand why the play had such success when done by an art group. That it is for Broadway, we doubt.

Author Frank Carney is concerned with such fundamental ideas as reason vs. faith, and superstition vs. religion. His script has to do with a girl who returns to the poor farmhouse in which she was born in Ireland's County Mayo, after working in England during World War II.

IT IS OBVIOUS that she is emotionally disturbed. A well-meaning doctor, who seeks to find a reason behind everything, thinks her condition can be bettered in a hospital. But the family priest is certain that she is the victim of evil spirits as a result of having been used as a spiritualist's contact.

There is an eerie and fascinating climatic scene in which the devout Father, through belief, exorcises the demons from the haunted girl. It is a tense and gripping episode. It appeared to bring the first-nighters forward to the edges of their seats.

"The Righteous Are Bold" boasts folk writing that is evocative. It has a goodly measure of merit. Yet, despite Dowling's sensitive direction and the contributions of an excellent cast, it is not as consistently absorbing as it should be.

THE ACTING is simple and sincere. Irene Hayes makes an auspicious Broadway debut as the tormented girl. If there were times when her emotional scenes seemed a bit undisciplined, they were, nevertheless, effective.

Denis O'Dea, Bryan Herbert, Len Doyle, Nora O'Mahony, P. J. Kelly, Liam Gannon and James Neylin offer characterizations superior to the sketches provided them by Carney. And Watson Barratt has designed a setting that captures the dour and poverty - stricken farmhouse, surrounded by coastal rocks and too little arable land.

We hold Eddie Dowling in high regard. Starting in musical comedy, he has gone on to give us many fine and literate plays. Eddie loves God and the Irish. With this production, he has again demonstrated his fondness for both.

If we had the equivalent of Dublin's Abbey in New York, the new arrival would be quite at home. But on a Main Stem more concerned with the mundane than the spiritual, we fear that Carney's earnest, and sometimes inept, drama is a bit out of place.

Journal American
December 23, 1955

Irish Group Shines In Moving Drama

Dowling Offering Superbly Acted at Holiday Theatre

By JOHN McCLAIN

FOR HIS entire professional life Eddie Dowling has been a thoughtful and dedicated friend of the theatre. There have been times when he was probably aware that his chances for a commercial success were thin, but if he believed in a play—if he thought it had the ingredients of worthwhile drama — he plunged ahead.

Last night he brought a group of Abbey Theatre players to the Holiday Theatre in "The Righteous Are Bold," a new play by Frank Carney which had enjoyed considerable success in Dublin. It is an arresting and marvelously moving piece, acted superbly, and well worth an excursion to the theatre. Whether or not it will be vastly popular is another thing.

For this is a tortured and always indigenous tale of the woes of the poor mountain Irish.

Not Amusing

Their lives are stark and stern and their emotions rise and fall with the tumult of the tides that beat against their barren coast. This is not what could be remotely described as an hilarious evening.

But it has an abounding sense of authenticity; there is a lyric quality to the speech, the characters are developed with rare incision, and the story itself has enormous power.

The daughter of a poor farmer goes to London, does a hitch in a factory and rather mysteriously winds up in a hospital. When she finally comes home it is apparent that she is suffering from a mental derangement, which baffles the local doctor. But when the priest appears, it is obvious that she has become possessed of the devil as the result of some adventures in spiritualism she encountered in England. The remainder of the evening is devoted to the means by which the priest is able, eventually, to restore her peace of mind.

Denis O'Dea, the star of the proceedings, makes a belated entrance in the second act, but proceeds to rule the evening thereafter in the part of Father O'Malley. He has a dominant presence, a constantly commanding sense of the role.

Irish Are Violent

Irene Hayes, an American playing the daughter, gives another enormously demanding performance in a season which has been marked by similar successes from the distaff side. There will be those who may accuse her of too strenuous seizures at times, but we must all remember that the Irish are a violent race.

The rest of the cast are equally magnificent: Len Doyle, as the father; Nora O'Mahony as the mother; James Neylin as the brother; P. J. Kelly, as Willie the Post; Bryan Herbert, Liam Gannon, Frederica Going and Mary O'Brady.

The bold, windswept ridge of Croagh Patrick, County Mayo, and the interior of the Geratys' bleak cottage have been faithfully reproduced by Watson Barratt — and I thought Mr. Dowling's direction was always assured and forceful.

The season marches on, the hits continue. This may not be one of the big ones at the box office, but it is excellent theatre.

The New York Times
December 23, 1955

Theatre: 'The Righteous Are Bold'

Irish Import Arrives on Stage at Holiday

By BROOKS ATKINSON

FRANK CARNEY'S "The Righteous Are Bold," which opened at the Holiday last evening, has had a considerable success in Ireland.

It is hard to believe that it will repeat that success here. For the subject matter is alien to American experience and habits of thought. It is the story of a young Irish girl who is possessed of devils. In the last act the local priest exorcises the devils and gives up his own life in saving hers.

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It is said that Irish people accept this theme because "possession," as it is called, is something that many people believe in. In "The Righteous Are Bold," Nora Geraty returns to her mountain home in County Mayo after having lived in England. Her return is preceded by two letters from a priest in Lancashire who hints that there is something mysteriously wrong with her.

There is. She has fits of violence when she smashes the statue of Our Lady, screams blasphemies, talks in foreign tongues and ancient languages. There are also scars on her body that cannot be accounted for. The local doctor cannot cure her. Only the priest understands her malady. He frees her from evil spirits by prayer and ritual.

If Mr. Carney had written his drama with poetry, if the performance were in a vein of incantation, "The Righteous Are Bold" might be more convincing. But he has written it in a style of Irish folk drama that has probably seen its best days. There are some interesting characters in it—notably a garrulous, cunning postman played with great humor by P. J. Kelly. Bland and rascally at the same time, Mr. Kelly is lively and amusing.

Drama by Carney Deals With 'Possessed' Girl

In fact, the traditional Irish characters are well played in general under Eddie Dowling's direction. Len Doyle and Nora O'Mahony, as the father and mother, have the warmth and tartness of interesting country people. As men of the younger generation, Liam Gannon and James Neylin are also thoroughly alive. And Bryan Herbert plays the local physician with explosions of temperamental choler.

Denis O'Dea as the priest and Irene Hayes as the girl who is possessed have the most vital roles to play. Mr. O'Dea speaks in the soft, musical tones that invariably dissolve American audiences, but his paternal gravity does not have much variety in it. Miss Hayes, who is making her Broadway debut, has animation enough for two. She gives a highly wrought performance that alternates between fits of wildness and interludes of remorse and terror.

But it is a performance achieved more by industry than by passionate virtuosity, and it does not seem to have much truth inside. One would think that only a highly gifted, experienced actress could make the part wholly credible.

"The Righteous Are Bold" has a good setting by Watson Barratt, and Peggy Clark's lighting is beautiful. Everything possible has been done to give the play unearthly eloquence. But Mr. Carney's style of playwriting is literal, and the theme is hard to believe in the simple framework of his literary design.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
December 23, 1955

Reverence Proved Via Shock Route

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

There is a devout thriller at the Holiday, a melodrama about faith. "The Righteous Are Bold" is often quite shocking, in order to prove eventually all the more reverent.

The drama is about simple people living in stark and fickle Irish mountain country. The big family is all but gone, as each child strikes out into the world, usually to America, to better himself.

Now Nora is coming home, preceded by strange letters from her priests in England, where she has been working. It appears she is subject to fits of the most blasphemous nature. She reviles the Madonna and threatens the priest.

The characters began to take position in the range from reason through superstition to pure faith. The mother is simplest of them and unquestionably trusts the agent of the Church. The father is moved by the girl's pleas and the bursting arrogance of the son.

Pagan Rites.

An ancient postman tries his wily pagan rituals over boiling pots to cure her. And her lover finds no ways or means beyond his love for her.

Eventually the girl's outbursts, her wild behaviour and howling in strange languages frightens even the doctor.

Finally the priest performs an exorcism. He has known the girl was used as a medium by spiritualists. He believes that a true evil agency has possessed her and is responsible for the stigmatic bruises on her body.

In saving the girl, the priest undergoes an exhausting experience which takes his life.

This is pure theater of the boldest sort.

Honest Work.

The people are simple. They have little life except for the immediate purposes of the play. But the work is deeply honest and tremendously gripping.

For all that, it is not, in this production, the memorable evening it should be.

The central role of the obsessed girl calls for a mad and brilliant performance. Young Irene Hayes is beautiful and radiant. She has fine moments, like the flailing attack on the priest.

But her maturing as an actress has only brought her to the point where she has the experience, instead of giving it to the audience. And she has not the iron control to dole out her effects astutely enough to still make wild effects at the end.

Believable Performance.

Nora O'Mahoney as the mother gives the gemlike performance here, so honest you believe the house, the storm and the mountains.

Denis O'Dea is immensely forceful as the priest, though his simple power would not be hurt if he could be heard more clearly.

P. J. Kelly gives wicked, wily humor to the postman, and Len Doyle is authentic and stalwart as the father.

The play has a breathtaking set of mountains, moors and storms that surge with the story.

New York Post

December 23, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Irish Case of Demonic Possession

"The Righteous Are Bold" might be described as an Irish "Dybbuk." The play by Frank Carney, which had the longest run in the history of Dublin's Abbey Theater, is concerned with demonic possession and the driving out of the devil from the body and soul of a girl who had sinned by becoming a spiritualist's medium. As a drama, it suffers from a tendency to dawdle, despite its earnest single-mindedness, but it has the virtue of a passionately intense sincerity that makes it worthy of respect, if by no means of thoroughgoing enthusiasm.

At the Holiday Theater last night, where it had its first New York performance, it likewise has the virtue of an honest and quietly powerful portrayal by Denis O'Dea, one of Ireland's best contemporary actors, in the role of the priest who exorcises the demon and gives his life in the struggle. In addition, the play provides a new actress named Irene Hayes with an opportunity for some rather effective emotional fireworks in the part of the girl possessed of the devil. The drama is considerably aided by the fact that the acting seems as sincere as the writing.

Being Serious

Although there is certainly that similarity with "The Dybbuk" in theme and viewpoint, the celebrated Jewish play had the advantage of being set in a distant medieval period and presented as a mystic legend. By adopting the modern background of an Irish village and giving his story a realistic mood, Mr. Carney has made "The Righteous Are Bold" much more difficult to accept by a metropolitan audience with a possible tendency toward skepticism, and it is decidedly to his credit that there is never any danger of his play not being taken with proper seriousness.

This, I am inclined to believe, is no small achievement. Even though the narrative's skeptical doctor and the girl's father and brother in their moments of doubt may represent your viewpoint and mine far more than do the pious priest and the believing mother, I don't think you will find yourself in any mocking mood in the final scene where the girl's evil spirit is driven off and the cleric collapses by the fireside. The ability to make an audience even temporarily suspend disbelief represents no small talent, and Mr. Carney possesses it.

Comedy Touch

But there are other problems for a playwright, and it seems to me he hasn't handled some of them equally well. To fill out his evening he has gone in for some fairly conventional Irish peasant comedy, particularly in the character of a comic postman with his own heathen devices for driving out devils, and, on such occasions, the play seems to be taking a long time to pass a given point, as well as offering dangerous chances for the sense of disbelief to return. Yet there is no doubt that the play grows in power and intensity as it goes along.

The persuasive sincerity of the narrative is greatly aided, not only by Mr. O'Dea's excellent performance, but by Eddie Dowling's earnest direction. If this highly specialized mood of simple piety ever lost its atmosphere of conviction by a false step in acting or staging, it might easily have got out of hand and become embarrassing, but this never happens. "The Righteous Are Bold" offers a viewpoint to which I find myself far from sympathetic, and much of it strikes me as pretty naive in its treatment, but I have vast respect for its intensity of conviction.

New York Herald Tribune

December 23, 1955

THEATER

'The Righteous Are Bold'

By WALTER F. KERR

At the climax of "The Righteous Are Bold" the thunder is roaring, the darkening mists are swirling more rapidly over an Irish mountainside, sea-gulls are cawing in terror, an ashen priest is leaning shakily against a doorjamb, and—at the center of things—a wildly disheveled girl is hurling a crucifix into the fireplace, spitting at those who would save her, and then writhing in torment on the floor at their feet. The situation should, to say the least, be roaringly dramatic. Why isn't it?

I don't think the difficulties that confront the new melodrama at the Holiday stem wholly from the play's highly specialized subject matter. Dramatist Frank Carney, has, to be sure, plunged into troublesome territory. An Irish lass who has been working in England comes home with a devil in her flesh. She has been bruised by his very physical assaults, she cannot stand the sight of a vigil lamp before a household statue of the Virgin, she reels out—in her tantrums—long passages from languages she has never learned.

In the quarrels that Mr. Carney has thrust upon a peasant community at "the edge of beyond," quarrels between a doctor, a priest, and a stubborn family over whether or not the girl is to be exorcised, there is a certain plaintive and plodding repetition. The author does not so much advance his subject as tease it, circle it, and finally send it off at its most explosive point to a near-by room. But the piece is still something more than a kind of primitive documentary, and it is possible to believe that in its longish run at the Abbey Theater it did develop some genuine power.

There are still sequences that have a snake-like fascination: the girl droning out—in an idiot monotone—the story of her life in London, the priest silently striding across the stage to her and shutting off her fury with a blessing. And in a bit of folk-school comedy—the local postman is prepared to help matters along with some druid mumbo-jumbo, but he cannot begin his work over a cauldron without first saying a "Hail Mary"—a curious blend of serious content and light comic realism is suggested.

The evening does not, however, ever generate the firm, passionate central authority that is needed to compel our belief. The key weakness, I think, is in the performance that Irene Hayes is giving as the luckless victims of forces beyond her. Miss Hayes is not necessarily a bad actress. But she does not possess, at the moment, the shrewdness, the range, or the variety that would enable her to slip with ease from the happy village innocent that every one knows to the demonic whirlwind that no one can control.

Until her first-act entrance the placid, easygoing, only normally worried lives of the Geraty family seem gently plausible. As mother Geraty (Nora O'Mahony) putters over a steaming teapot or wryly snatches a letter from under the nose of a prying postman, as father Geraty (Len Doyle) packs a clay pipe and takes a patriarchal tone, the County Mayo background comes casually to life.

But when Miss Hayes is suddenly discovered standing dazed in a doorway, something more than an expected dramatic note is introduced. Strain comes in with her—a rushing, over-anxious, essentially unconfident drive. The actress cannot wait on a stage, cannot let an effect sink in, cannot take root. The result is a focal performance that is insistent, monotonous, and so highly-pitched that it often simply cannot be heard.

By contrast, Denis O'Dea's quiet, controlled, always reserved performance as the priest seems a great deal more exciting. He may work with great economy, but he carries enough authority with him to convince us that he can, with a word, force his frenzied charge to drop a knife and fall to her knees. The balance of the company, working under Eddie Dowling's direction, varies considerably in quality: Liam Gannon's young lover is thoroughly appealing, Bryan Herbert's doubtful doctor shifts erratically from simple reasonableness to rather pompous rhetoric. P. J. Kelly's wonder-working postman reaches for outright caricature.

"The Righteous Are Bold" does not, in its present production, cast a compelling spell of its own.

"Six Characters in Search of an Author"

Daily Mirror

December 12, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'6 Characters' Don't Live Up to Luigi

• New adaptation at Phoenix is on the hokey side. Slapstick touches help.

Luigi Pirandello was a dramatic sleight-of-hand artist, particulary adept at the shell game. He constantly wrestled with the question of what is illusion, and what reality.

The late Brock Pemberton produced Pirandello's best known play, "Six Characters in Search of an Author," many years ago at the now-vanished Princess Theatre. His facility and style made it absorbing hocus-pocus.

MANAGERS HAVE been threatening to revive the provocative work over the seasons. Well, T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton, in association with Clinton Wilder, turned the trick at the Phoenix Theatre on Sunday evening. The new adaptation by Tyrone Guthrie and Michael Wager, is no improvement on the original.

The manifestations at the Phoenix, directed by Guthrie, is on the hokey side. It takes magic to bring this play off effectively, and what we saw Sunday evening resembled prestidigitation by one of those nitery slickers who makes a funny, after wobbling through the w.k. sponge-ball routine.

The mystical charade has to do with a sextet of characters who appeal to a director to bring them to life—a morbid, decadent lot, but in their own opinion more real than the actors who interpret them.

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BETTY LOU HOLLAND is earnest as the stepdaughter mistakenly betrayed by the father. She has several touching moments, but her performance, on the whole, lacks dramatic glow. Whitfield Connor pleads the case of the father straightforwardly. Katherine Squire has a moving pasage or two as the hysterical, distraught mother. Wager is dour as the depressed and depressing son.

Kurt Kasznar, as the director; Natalie Schafer, as the leading lady; and Francis Bethencourt, as the leading man, take up the slapstick when the satiric touch is called for. But, it must be added, the audience loved their burlesque thrusts.

A student of the drama will probably want to catch this demonstration of a clever playwright offering now-you-see-it-you-don't. Pirandello must have thoroughly enjoyed penning "Six Characters."

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HE, NO DOUBT, laughed out loud as he told actors that they were less permanent, more illusory, than the people they were to impersonate.

"SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR"

Revival of the Luigi Pirandello play, adapted by Tyrone Guthrie and Michael Wager; staged by Mr. Guthrie; costumes by Alvin Colt; scenery by Klaus Holm; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton in association with Clinton Wilder at the Phoenix Theatre, December 11, 1955. The cast:

Father.....Whitfield Connor
Mother.....Katherine Squire
Stepdaughter...Betty Lou Holland
Son.....Michael Wager
Boy.....James Lacirignola
Girl.....Karen Sue Trent
Madame Pace...Maud Scheerer
Director.....Kurt Kasznar
Leading Lady...Natalie Schafer
Leading Man..Francis Bethencourt
Second Woman..Shirley Grayson
Second Man.....William Cottrell
Character Actress...Aileen Poe
Juvenile.....William Whitman
Ingenue.....Hale Gabrielson
Character Juvenile..John Glennon
Stage Manager...Fred Warriner
Wardrobe Mistress.....
Mildred Chandler
Stagehand.....Russell Morrison
Supporting Cast....Dario Barri, Marilyn Stevens, Mervin Williams

New York Post

December 12, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Revival of a Pirandello Play

Luigi Pirandello was the most distinguished modern Italian dramatist, and "Six Characters in Search of an Author" is the most celebrated, if not the best, of his plays. This may be the only non-controversial statement I'll be able to set down concerning the revival of his famous metaphysical melodrama, which opened last night at the Phoenix Theater in a new English adaptation by Tyrone Guthrie and Michael Wager. I'm not even sure it can be described as a "metaphysical melodrama" any longer. In the current version, it seems more a metaphysical farce, and very long.

Not that "Six Characters" was ever without its elements of satirical comedy. As you no doubt know, the play has to do with some mysterious personages who arrive at a theater where a rehearsal is going on, announce that they are characters from a tragedy their author was unable to finish, and insist that they be allowed to act out their own story in place of the triviality that was about to be staged by the professional actors. There always was sardonic humor in the contrast between the artificialities of the theater and the ugly reality of actual tragedy as Pirandello saw it.

Since the revival has been staged by Mr. Guthrie, who demonstrated such brilliant capacity for directing slapstick farce in "The Matchmaker," the biting comic strain inherent in "Six Characters" might be expected to work out admirably under his talented manipulations. But I don't think it does. Where performers hiding under tables in the Thornton Wilder uproar seemed richly comic, actors in rehearsal falling over chairs don't have the same happy effect amid Pirandello's brooding contemplation of reality and illusion. They merely added to the play's length.

The chief result, it appeared to me, was that a tense and rather concentrated dramatic work grew at times almost unbearably diffuse. And the tragedy of a broken and unhappy family, together with all the striking meditations on his favorite theme by an eminent philosophical playwright, was by no means given powerful ironic counterpoint by the humorous interpolations. Instead, the haunting effect of a remarkable play was diluted and confused by the mixture of moods, until "Six Characters in Search of an Author" became but intermittently interesting.

This is not to say that Pirandello is without sin in the matter. The family tragedy that he introduced, with its lurid episode of a meeting in a house of prostitution, is not nearly as movingly dramatic as he meant it to be, and his play without its speculations and its sardonic contrasts would have been fairly commonplace melodrama. All that I insist on is that the presumably comic scenes of temperamental actors in rehearsal shouldn't have been emphasized in the revival in a manner that makes farce the work's predominant element.

Of the players, I thought Betty Lou Holland, as the bitter daughter, most successfully captured the mood and quality of Pirandello, although Michael Wager had his effective moments as a resentful son. Kurt Kasznar, as the stage director, and Natalie Schafer and Francis Bethencourt, as the chief displayers of stage temperament, offered amusing burlesques of their types, and it was Mr. Guthrie's fault if they seemed to have dropped in from a different play. I can't believe that "Six Characters" is at its best as a farce.

The New York Times
December 12, 1955

Theatre: Pirandello at the Phoenix

His Six Characters Search for Author

By BROOKS ATKINSON

FROM almost any point of view, Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author" is a brilliant play. And the performance, which opened at the Phoenix last evening, is brilliant also.

Basically, it is a philosophical play that expresses Pirandello's immutable theme. He was a man in search of something himself. He was in search of reality, which always eluded him, and will also elude you if you submit to his argument. Only works of art have a continuous reality, he says. Only the six characters in this play will endure, one of them says in the last act. Even this might be disputed. For works of art change in meaning and significance through the years, or don't they? Or is it that the form remains?

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"Six Characters in Search of an Author" illustrates Pirandello's theme concretely and vividly. Into the midst of a theatrical rehearsal it introduces the six characters, ominously clad in black, looking for an author who can give them the permanent form of a work of art. The characters have a harrowing story to tell. The actors are looking for a play. What could be a happier circumstance than for the actors to watch the characters act out their story and then turn it into a theatre play?

Nothing could provide a more bitter satire on the nature of truth in the theatre. For the difference between the melancholy characters and the flamboyant actors who try to impersonate them is devastating and very funny. But "Six Characters in Search of an Author" goes beyond theatrical satire. It looks over the rim of doom. Pirandello's skepticism is cosmic and frightening. This is a macabre fantasy. It illustrates a chaotic thought. It carries the full weight of Pirandello's pitiless convictions.

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Trust Tyrone Guthrie to make the most of it in the production he has directed. On an undecorated, working stage, which Klaus Holm has ingeniously furnished and lighted, Mr. Guthrie has designed a vibrant performance that is funny, excited and also haunted with strange images of death.

Aware of the probing quality of the literature they are playing, the actors work with great intensity. The tone varies from the temperamental explosiveness of Kurt Kasznar, as the stage director, to the passionate vehemence of Whitfield Connor, as the most voluble of the six characters.

They are all in fine fettle—Betty Lou Holland as a tormented daughter who sees her father's complete reality in the most degrading moment of his life; Michael Wager as the son who is seething with hatred; Natalie Schafer as the grandiloquent leading lady of the theatre troupe; Francis Bethencourt as the supercilious leading man, not to make note of all the others in an exhilarating cast.

Strange that "Six Characters in Search of an Author" has been neglected for so many years. It is a penetrating, ruthless drama written in an idiomatic style. In Mr. Guthrie's fluid performance, it is a triumph for the Phoenix Theatre.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 12, 1955

THEATER

'Six Characters'

By WALTER F. KERR

I'M dead certain that director Tyrone Guthrie has extracted every ounce of comedy that ever was in "Six Characters in Search of an Author," and I'll make bets that he has poured in whole flagons of merriment that Pirandello never dreamed of.

Pirandello's celebrated exercise in intellectual sleight-of-hand begins with a routine acting company rehearsing a routine play, introduces out of nowhere six shadowy characters who have been rejected by their own unnamed author, and then goes on to demonstrate—with wit and no little good sense—that their imaginative existence is a great deal more real than the curious realities the players are so proudly putting on.

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As the pompous, preening, and hopelessly conventional Equity members attempt to give "stage life" to the genuine agonies of their visitors, the Phoenix Theater bubbles over with laughter. Leading-lady Natalie Schaefer is a splendid cartoon as she drapes herself against a brothel screen and plays a passionate moment with excruciating refinement. Francis Bethencourt, as a dashing hero with his coat draped over his shoulders, Aileen Poe, as a character woman with a great big heart and a fondness for lady-fingers, and John Glennon, Fred Warriner, and William Whitman as members of the entourage are all in fine tongue-in-cheek fettle.

To top off the intramural satire, Kurt Kasznar gives a shrewd, robust and sometimes spectacularly funny performance as a director who can stamp both feet in perfect rhythm, wither his 'raw material' with a pout and a stare, and still embrace his defenseless actors with true Shubert Alley ardor.

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The truth of the matter is that everything in "Six Characters" that has to do with the mechanics of the theater, with the bedraggled late arrivals and the rehearsal chatter and the feuds and follies of some vain and gloriously empty people is brilliantly done. The greedy joy of the company as they discover that somewhere in the interlopers' lives there is a workable 'sock' scene, the evasion of all the actresses as their director looks about for someone to play a mother, the forest of wagging fingers as everybody talks about the art of 'highlighting' at once—all of these are superb vignettes, linked together in an almost ceaseless flow, in the very best Tyrone Guthrie manner.

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Where Pirandello's emphatic contrast between the "illusionistic" world of the theater and the "true" world of inspired and enduring character is given less than its due is in the odd posturing and ritualistic accents of the six ghostly newcomers. "We are more real than you are," says one of them to the actors impersonating them. But, in the sleek stylization at the Phoenix, they aren't. Whitfield Connor, as a father who has destroyed his own family and another's, races through the essential argument of the play in such glib tones, and with such arbitrary emphases, as to make him seem at least as much a puppet as any of the "Broadway" clowns.

Betty Lou Holland, enormously effective in one brief moment of revulsion at "passion without love," still has a faint air of the glistening automaton about her, the outburst of anguish with which Katherine Squire's mother must conclude the second act emerges as the same paper-thin melodrama that the rest of the play is kidding, and Michael Wager, after an effective initial moment of quiet fury, comes to seem more nearly a refugee from "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" than an intensely earnest and embittered fragment of truth.

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As a result, and in spite of a new and excellent translation by Mr. Wager and Mr. Guthrie, Pirandello's thrusting of the "real" world into a world of make-believe loses power and clarity. If there is any contrast left in the work, it is only that between two different kinds of make-believe, and a work conceived in several dimensions is reduced to the single dimension of comic fantasy.

Even so, the dimension that is left is quite an entertaining one, the play is worth seeing on almost any terms, and the staging itself is the most fluid and assured to have graced the Phoenix in many a moon.

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

December 12, 1955

'Six Characters in Search of an Author' Given Pleasant Revival

By JOHN CHAPMAN

As it was produced last evening at the Phoenix Theatre, Luigi Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author" is a pleasantly stimulating theatrical exercise, even though it may not impress people as profoundly as it did when Brock Pemberton produced it in the early 1920s. It was, to begin with, a stunt with philosophical overtones, and at the Phoenix now it remains the same, and it is agreeably acted by a company whose chief player is a good one, Kurt Kasznar.

Pirandello's conceit was, and is, that characters can be more real than people, because people are unpredictable but characters, once they have been set in the mind, are unchangeable. And so it is that six people, all in funereal black, invade a stage where a play is in rehearsal.

An Author's Orphans

We never get to know what the play is about, but we soon recognize the actors as the various types of their profession—handsome leading man, vain leading woman, character players and whatnot. They are upset no end when these strangers insinuate themselves on the stage and insist that their own story should be played. Soon everybody becomes involved in this story, which seems to be a handy combination of lust, melodrama and tragedy. The conclusion of the comedy coincides with the author's own conclusion, that characters are just characters and it is best not to bother with them in the theatre.

Kasznar gives an excellent performance as a stage director who is confronted by six people who have been abandoned by their author and who now insist that they must have a stage on which to continue their existence. He is annoyed but impressed, and he never knows just what to do with them.

Just Unserious Enough

Whitfield Connor, as an errant father; Katherine Squire, as a frightfully suffering mother; Betty Lou Holland, as a stepdaughter who has led a life of sin, and Michael Wager, as a son who is disgusted with the whole mess and will have no part of it, are the principals among the strange visitors who want their own play to be played.

Among the actors who accommodate them are Natalie Schafer, as a leading woman on the passe side, and Francis Bethencourt as a leading man who is very pleasing to himself.

Michael Wager and Tyrone Guthrie have made this new adaptation of "Six Characters," and Dr. Guthrie has directed the comedy with just the proper lack of seriousness. If the play were directed as anything but a theatrical stunt it could be pretty grim, in which the only laugh of the evening might be a line intoned by the suffering mother, "Oh, God, why do they want to make a show out of something so horrible?" Guthrie manages to make it all quite entertaining, and Klaus Holm's simple scenery and Alvin Colt's 1920 costumes make it look pleasingly quaint.

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Cast Is Wonderful In Pirandello Play

But Story, Says Critic McClain, Defies His Immediate Grasp

By JOHN McCLAIN

FOR QUITE a few years I have been going along like a little soldier, doing my level best to tell people what I think about the theatre and occasionally succeeding. It hasn't always been easy; there have even been times when I had to read some reference material to figure out what I'd seen. But not until last night did I encounter something which not only defied my immediate grasp but would not yield to any amount of later analysis. I am talking about a little item by Luigi Pirandello called "Six Characters in Search of an Author" which was offered at the Phoenix Theatre.

Well, there are these six people, see, and I guess they kind of represent reality. Well, maybe not entire reality, but something close to it. Now they come into a theatre where some other people are putting on a play, understand, and they act out part of another play which is different and goes to show that there is quite a divergence between the world of the theatre and true life.

Are you listening?

In any event, they are never able to finish their play because their author didn't even finish it himself and, anyway, there is this breach between the world of make-believe and the one of actuality. All I know is that finally a young man puts a revolver in his mouth, there is a loud off-stage "bang!" and things are tough all over.

Seriously I believe I do see what Mr. Pirandello is trying to say, and I can be accused of stupidity or carelessness or both, but I insist that he has chosen the most devious means in the world to make his point. There is some humor in his approach, a rasher of memorable lines, but there are also the most diffused series of remarks and circumstances since Happy Hooligan.

Cast Wonderful

In the matter of casting and production, however, it is quite another story. Tyrone Guthrie, no less, has directed, and he has injected into it the same sense of insanity that came off with, I thought, better effect in "The Matchmaker," but which is still telling here.

The cast is wonderful: Francis Bethencourt, Whitfield Connor, Betty Lou Holland, Kurt Kasznar, Natalie Schafer, Katherine Squire and Michael Wager. It is almost certain we'll never see this most controversial endeavor more thoughtfully presented in our time.

You want to get good and confused? First of all, read the play; get some articles of serious criticism about it, and then, of course, go down to the Phoenix and see it. After that I'd take a good brisk run around the reservoir.